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ABSTRACT

The authors, representing the viewpoints of the academic and the practicing consultant, consider the integration of intervention theory and practice in public schools. The first part of the presentation discusses the intervention theory as a guide to the activities of the organizational change agent. The distinctive characteristics of the public school system (as opposed to business, voluntary, and other types of organizations) are considered, and ways in which the intervention model might be modified and made more directly relevant to school systems are described. The second part of the presentation draws upon case material from actual intervention activities in public school systems. Factors leading to more effective consultative relationships are identified and compared to the theory-based intervention approach described earlier. Finally, a revised version of the intervention model is developed for the school system. (Author)

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INTERVENTION THEORY AND PRACTICE IN SCHOOL SYSTEMS*

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DRAFT OF THE PAPER TO BE PRESENTED TO THE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH ASSOCIATION ANNUAL MEETING

STRATEGY ADOPTED IN CONSULTING TO SCHOOL SYSTEMS

In our work with school systems we have attempted to adopt the general approach outlined by Chris Argyris. Basically Argyris advocates three primary tasks for the interventionist:

- to help generate valid and useful information
- to create conditions in which clients can make informed and free choices
- to help clients develop an internal committment to their choice

Some of the implications of these tasks are extremely important. For example if the diagnosis phase of the relationship is to be useful it must be seen by all as reflecting valid and complete information. Therefore it must view the major issues that occur at any level in the system. It should not reflect a view point of one sub-group.

Encouraging free choice means that the consultant should avoid making decisions on behalf of his client. The clients must remain responsible for their destiny and for the autonomy of their system.

In selecting a course of action the system, the client should experience a high degree of ownership and feeling of responsibility about the choice and about its implications. He then acts on the choice because it fulfills his needs in his sense of responsibility as well as the needs and responsibilities he holds on behalf of the system.

Our company, Stevenson & Kellogg, Ltd. has undertaken a number of organization development studies within school boards of Ontario. We have found that attempting to focus on these primary tasks has led to successful consulting relationships.

BACKGROUND ON ONE SCHOOL SYSTEM

An example is the organization development program with one of the larger county school boards in Ontario. Our experience in this project provides an useful example of the way in which the Argyris approach can be applied to school systems.

Some months ago the Administrative Council -- the seven senior academic and business officials of the system -- became interested in organization development. They went on a three day retreat during

which they attempted to assess the current performance of their school system. In general they judged that while the system was attaining a reasonable standard they aspired to a much better performance.

As a result of the retreat, the Administrative Council presented to the Board of Trustees a general recommendation that an organization development study should be undertaken. The study has as its broad objectives "to maximize human effectiveness and to operate according to goals mutually acceptable to each level of the organization". The more detailed expectations of this study were expressed as follows:

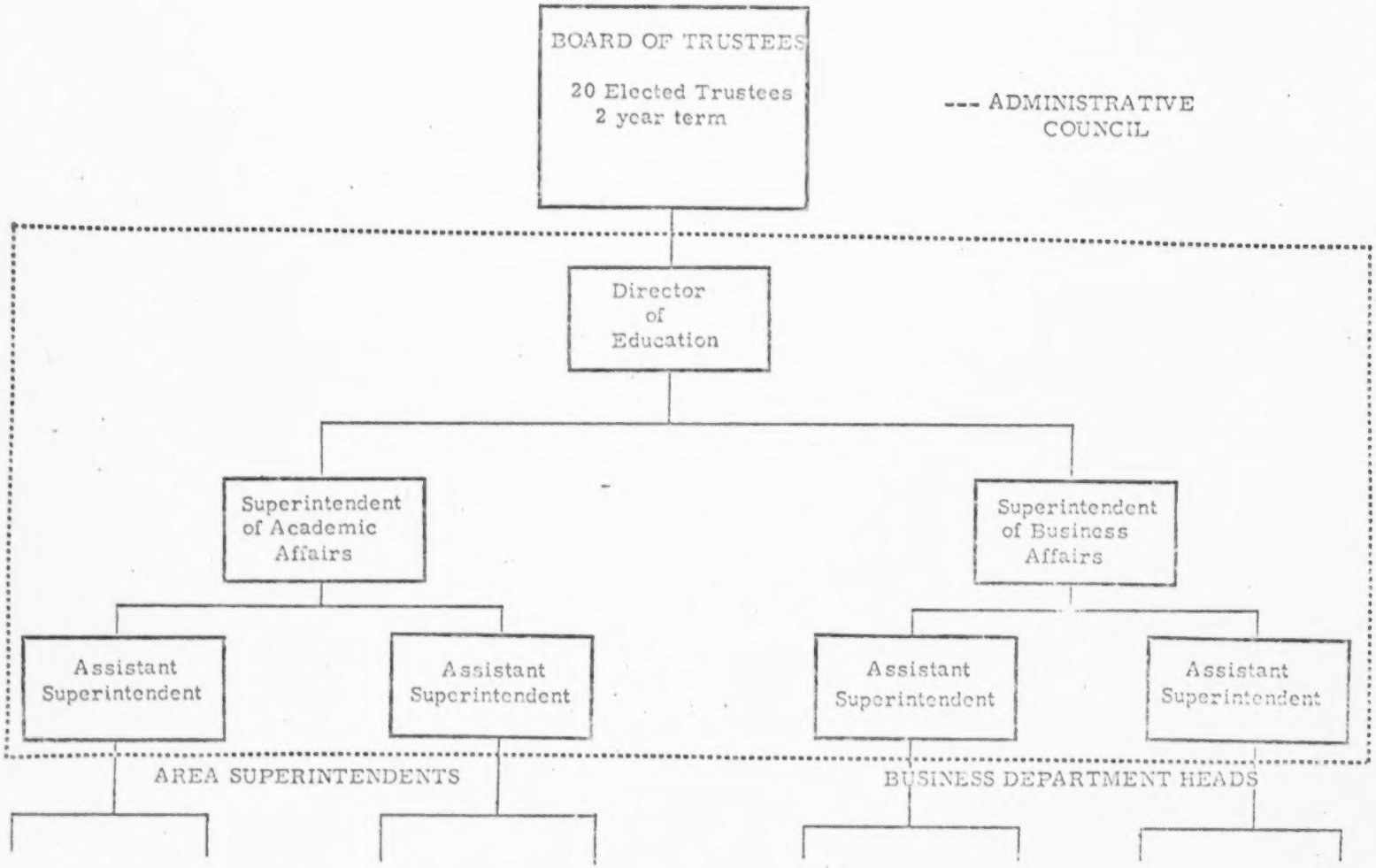
> "We want to move our total organization closer to excellence by involving management personnel in diagnosis, goal setting, policy making, problem solving and evaluation."

These general terms of reference were sent to a number of consultants. After an extensive round of interviews the Administrative Council selected our company to help them with this program.

At this point, we should describe the structure of the school system. See Figure 1.

Figure 1

ORGANIZATION STRUCTURE OF THE BOARD OF EDUCATION



The Trustees authorize expenditures such as that involved in our program. When our proposal was presented, considerable debate was undertaken. The result -- only the diagnostic phase (3 months) of the 18 month program was approved and funded. Authorizing the balance of the study was contingent on the Board's evaluation of the diagnosis.

There seemed to be mistrust and conflict between the Administration and the Trustees. We seemed to be identified by both parties as in the Administrator's "camp".

The Trustees' decision had the effect of shifting control of the study from the Administrators to the Board, to the dismay of the Administrators.

We decided that we should follow the Argyris strategy, and attempt to achieve a position in the system that was in neither camp, but presenting to both an objective view of the system. In this way, we help to develop valid and useful information.

During the diagnosis phase, our contacts with the system were extensive:

- Interviews singly and in groups, with some 200 representatives of the school system, including all senior administrative and business personnel. People at all levels seemed quite open -- discussing both strengths and weaknesses of the system

- Interviews with Trustees -- each Trustee invited to attend one of three luncheon meetings. Trustees were quite prepared to discuss their role, the role of the Administration, and the relationships between them.

- Observation of a number of Administrative and Academic Council meetings and Board of Trustee meetings. All these meetings tended to be relatively formal. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with the process the meetings in private, but seldom expressed dissatisfaction in the meetings themselves.

For the diagnosis, we assembled the data, crystalized a number of key issues, and presented the data and issues verbally to the Administrative Council. At that time we discussed the program for the balance of the project. We seemed to reach general agreement on the elements of the

program. The program included work on the inter-group relationships between the Board of Trustees and the Administrative Council.

Because only the initial (diagnosis) phase of the project had been funded at this stage to present a written report to the Board of Trustees. We drafted that report, reflecting the data we had presented to the Administrative Council and the further program we had agreed upon. When we gave that report to the Administrative Council some negative reactions occurred. The general comments indicated that the report was rather strong, painting a bleak picture of the current operations in the school system and therefore of the Administration. For the first time the Administrative Council had some doubts about continuing the study. The report was presented to the Trustees, with one copy for each trustee and an understanding that the contents of the report should remain confidential for fear of public repercussions.

One of the major issues identified in the diagnosis report, as suggested by the organization chart in Figure 1 is the relationship between the Administrative Council and the Board of Trustees. Ultimate power to set policy and allocate funds rests with the Trustees, while the

execution of these policies and the decisions and actions of the system are under the control of the Administrative Council. Trustees often feel that the Administrators manipulate the Board meeting and therefore exercise final defacto power over the system. The Administrative Council, on the other hand, often see the Board, an elected (i.e. political) body as being overly concerned with trivia and putting unrealistic demands on the Administrators to back up proposals with extensive facts and figures.

The sequence of events at this point went as follows:

- Administrative Council had a private closed meeting with the Trustees to discuss the organization development program. At that time Administrative Council put forward a separate proposal that allowed for much more extensive involvement of senior officials.

- The consultants met with the members of the Administrative Council and with the Trustees again in a private close meeting. At this meeting the Trustees offered supporting evidence and in effect subscribed to the diagnosis of the system that had been written by the consultants. The senior Administrators expressed their reservations. Individuals seemed to open up in the presence of both groups and the consultants, expressing their deeply felt concerns and views. A general agreement was reached that the consultants and the Administrators should meet and draft a mutually acceptable outline for the balance of the program.

- The Director (the senior Administrator) had a series of meetings with the consultants, working out an agreed draft of the outline for the balance of the project. Administrative

Council accepted the new program. The Trustees agreed to fund the program.

The project as it is now described de-emphasizes one key point -- a focus of the consulting effort on the Trustee Administrative Council relationship. This was one of the key issues that had been highlighted in the feedback report. However, the election of the new Board of Trustees was due in a matter of weeks, which made it impractical to continue on with that part of the study. Further, the Administrative Council feel the relationship is largely their responsibility. A further point of difference in the revised program is a rather more analyical focus on the present Administrative structure. We will assess its suitability in light of the goals and general directions that are being set up for the system for the next five years.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE CONSULTING PROGRAM

The Trustee-Administrative Council relationship is no longer a specific point of concentration for the OD program. In the course of raising the issue of this relationship and presenting it both to Trustees and to the Administrative Council presented the data that reflect some of the dyfunctional aspects in the relationship. An observation of the operation of the two groups after presentation of our feedback indicates that the

inter-group relationship seemed substantially improved. The new tone of the relationship was evidenced in our private meeting with the Administrative Council and Trustees. Both groups seemed prepared to offer data on their perception of the system and on their perception of some of the issues that we agreed were important. In a fairly open and frank discussion we observed a movement toward a general agreement and acceptance of the diagnosis.

Testing the validity of the data in our feedback report was obviously a pivotal point of the study. The Administrative Council had apparently accepted the data and the recommendations on the program from the consultants. Their reaction to the written confirmation and the written report suggests they they in fact had not subscribed to the diagnosis but had accepted a prescription from the consultants. When faced with the data that we belive described the system they reacted quite negatively. We believe that the Administrators' reaction to the written report was an excellent test of their committment to the program and of the validity of the data that we were presenting. The result of the process is that, after discussing and working through their reservations, the Administrative Council is now strongly identi-

fying with the program and pushing ahead with its implementation.

In redrafting the program outline the consultants were allowing the system free choice as to the particular issues they wished to work on. We presented the issues we felt were important. Then we worked out a program to respond to the set of issues the Administrative Council specified. The resulting program although somewhat different from the original proposal seems to us to focus on key issues that are important to the Administrative Council and important to the effective operation of the system. Without this second round of development on the program outline we feel that committment to the program would have been relatively weak. The program would have suffered as a result.

A formal written report of the diagnosis was necessary because of the funding arrangements made by the trustees. On the one hand the creation of the report and the extensive discussion around it has delayed the project far beyond the intended schedule. On the other hand the round of discussions was probably the most effective intervention to date. In spite of its cost in consulting hours and in calendar delay, we believe that exercise was well worthwhile. The net result of that

activity could well be counted as an initial success experience. It seems to have cemented identification with the program. The net result of the discussions seems to have confirmed in the minds of the senior officials and of the Trustees the validity of the OD approach.

LEARNINGS FROM THIS PROJECT

What have we learned to date about organizational intervention from this project? Briefly put, we have come to question three basic assumptions of intervention theory:

- change efforts should start at the top
- the most pressing problems should be resolved first
- the change agent should attempt to encourage collaboration between competing parts of the system.

In the light of these theoretical assumptions, we were confronted with three critical realities of change in public school systems in Ontario. First, the top of the system, the Board of Trustees can only be changed for a two-year period, the term of elected office. Following this period, the composition of the Board could change drastically.

Therefore, the pay-off from working with the Board could be so temporary as to be impractical. Second, the most pressing problem, the Board - Administrative Council relationship, was made difficult by the basic difference between their professional (administrators) and political (Board) goals. This basic goal difference in conjunction with the two-year payoff period, made the costs exhoritant in relation to likely benefits. Third, the goal difference and division of function between Board and Administration again would make full collaboration difficult to obtain and at variance with the original intent of separating the powers of the two groups.

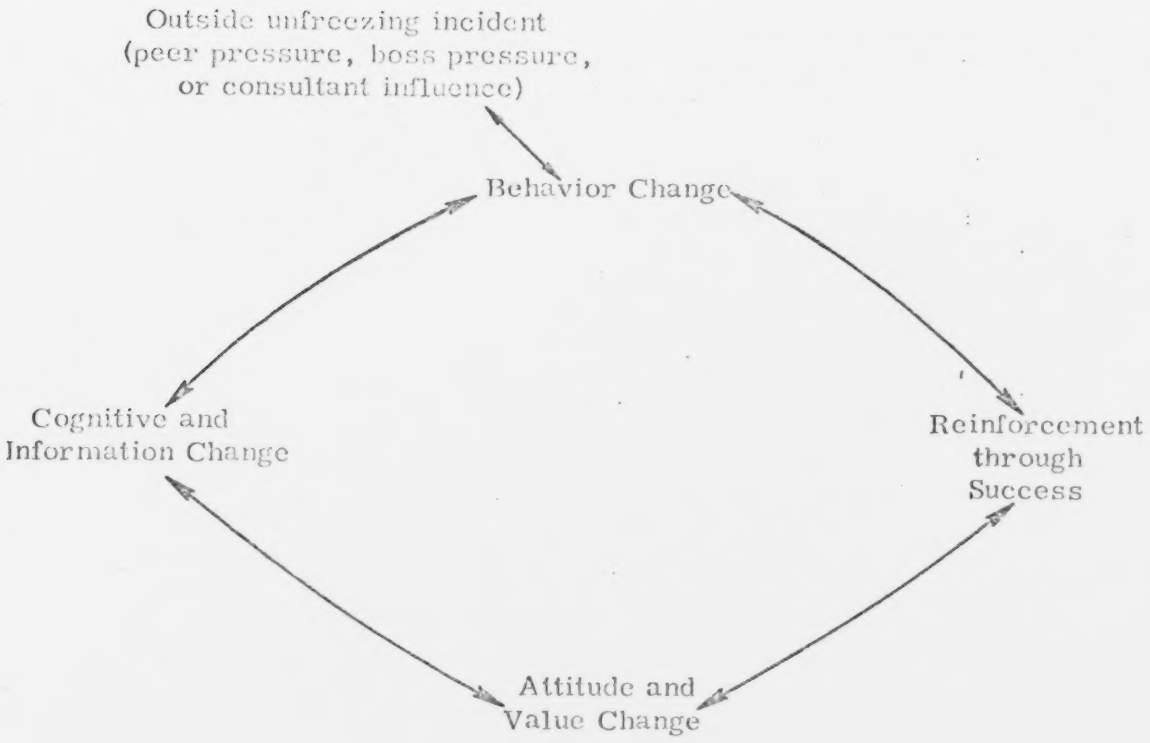
Therefore, as a result of the discussion of our diagnosis, we came to recognize and appreciate the difference in powers and goals of the two groups. We feel it was important that we openly discussed the problems that each group caused for the other. We achieved an awareness of the problem and a conceptual understanding. There was some reduction in antagonism and mistrust, but not a real, permanent solution of the inter-group problem. However, enough work on the issue was done to obtain the committment of both groups to the remainder of the change program and a higher quality design for it.

We have now defined the Board-Administration problem and the political issues as given, beyond our scope for the present. With the green light from both groups, we are now planning to intervene in the Administration sub-system on more limited problems. As Beer and Huse (1972) and (Hall and Schneider (1973)) suggest, success in limited change efforts can become visible and create a more positive climate and motivation for further change.

This process of creating a more favourable climate for change can operate as shown in Figure 2. An outside unfreezing agent (in this case, our diagnosis) can lead to a behavior change (discussion of the Board-Administrator inter-group relationship). Success results in positive reinforcement, which leads to more positive attitudes (both groups decided to continue the project). This in turn can lead to new information, which could be any new information the Board or Administration may acquire about themselves or the rest of the organization as a result of their more open and positive attitudes toward change. As a result of future successes on change efforts within the administration, the Board and Administrators may at some later date decide to make a further attempt to work on their own problem.

Figure 2

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING THROUGH SUCCESS (from Beer and Huse, 1972)



Another departure from our initial approach which is implicit here is that we no longer see it as necessary to solve problems first at the top. We will be working with key people lower down the organization, as well as with the Administrative Council, but not with the top (the Board). The key requirement about the top is that they not be actively opposed to the study, as Beer and Huse (1972) suggest. If a target of change is going to influence other people to be more accepting of change, the important feature of him is that we have influence in the system, i.e. be a key person. People as the top are usually influ ncial, but formal position is not the only source of personal influence.

To summarize, we can restate our major learnings as follows:

- It is not necessary to start a change program at the top of an organization. It is important to not have opposition from the top, but an important criteria for choosing an intervention target is that can be seen as influential within the system.
- Deal with problems that can be solved and attempt to create initial successes which will compound themselves and spread through the organization.
- Do not work on problems that cannot be solved or which are among the most difficult to solve (such as political problems). Similarly, do not "push" on people or parts

of the system who are strongly resisting change. Accept these as givens for the time being, and work around them. In time you may surround them with success and they may opt in voluntarily.